

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



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Artifacts | The Dinosaur in Anselm Kiefer

By Linda Yablonsky



*Anselm Kiefer's "Der Morgenthau Plan," 2012.
Charles Duprat, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery*

In person, Anselm Kiefer is much more self-mocking and relaxed than his enormous, heart-of-darkness German history paintings and titanic lead or concrete sculptures might suggest. On Thursday morning, clad in white yoga pants, a dark shirt and thin black flip-flops, the 68-year-old artist showed a light spirit as he walked through “Morgenthau Plan,” his exhibition opening tonight at the Gagosian Gallery on West 21st Street.

“It’s a conventional painting show,” Mr. Kiefer said with a laugh. That was a veiled reference to his 2010 exhibition in New York: an overwhelming spectacle of painting, photography and sculpture that related, as usual, to the legacy of Nazi Germany. By comparison, “Morgenthau Plan” feels almost serene. A few of the 15 paintings in the show are the scorched-earth landscapes Mr. Kiefer often makes. But many depict overgrown fields of bright flowers rising from the mud. The blossoms look burned or trampled, of course, but one grouping suggests the Impressionism of Monet, and the mammoth seascape in a lead frame is Mr. Kiefer in J. M. W. Turner mode.

The exhibition's title refers to a boneheaded 1944 proposal by Henry Morgenthau Jr., President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Treasury secretary, to strip Germany of its industrial might and turn the country into a nation of farmers so that it could never again arm itself. The following conversation took place as Mr. Kiefer and I strolled through "Morgenthau Plan."

Q. Do you ever work small?

A. I do watercolors. But no one wants to see them.

Where does your attraction to the monumental come from?

It's not that I like it. It's so people can't put the painting over the sofa. If you want to have this, you have to decide to put it in a room with nothing else.

What is the text written at the bottom of the seascape, "Von der Maas bis an die Memel, von der Etsch bis an den Belt"?

It's a line from "Deutschland Über Alles." This is now forbidden. It was a revolutionary song that became reactionary. The meaning changed.

The painting looks metallic.

It's been electrolyzed. I put the painting in a salt bath. One side is copper, the other lead. Ionization takes place. It will change. I don't know what it will be like in a year.

This kind of work must be physically demanding.

It's a dance. I use a very long spatula and go back and forth, like a dance.

Do you feel as physically vibrant now as you did when you were younger, or do you have to make adjustments?

I get mentally more flexible.

What would you say you've learned about the German character since you started out?

I discovered myself as a German.

You've said that you made this kind of work because you wanted to understand what kind of world you were born into.

I was born in a cave, in the cellar of a hospital in the Black Forest that was being bombed.

What do you actually remember of that time?

You can remember much more than you think. It's not only the brain that remembers. The cells remember. It goes back to the dinosaurs. Part of your brain is from the dinosaurs. Like jealousy — it's a very negative, nonsense feeling that comes from dinosaurs. They were jealous, fighting all the time. And part of their tiny brains is in us.

Do you ever feel jealous of other artists?

If you feel an artist is bigger than you, then you have to like him. Goethe said this once. I never dislike artists because they dislike me. I think I'm more objective.

Were there any artists in history who influenced your thinking?

A lot. Leonardo, Michelangelo, Caspar David Friedrich, Tiepolo — a lot.

Tell me about “Nigredo,” an extremely dark and brooding landscape.

“Nigredo” is a term of alchemy, and alchemy is transformation. So you can say that's a landscape after the war that's now transformed to something else. Morgenthau was also a transformation, as brutal as Mao, who wanted to transform peasant culture to an industrial culture, and it killed 30 million. So for me, this is the same but the other way around. This kind of transformation is completely bad. You can't transform an industrial nation to an agricultural one.

The color in this show is really striking.

“Nigredo” was colorful, too. I made it black. I thought, “Oh, all these colors.” Even the beauty of Matisse has big, profound depth, something dark. But beauty in itself doesn't exist. It's always contradictory. It doesn't answer the question of our destiny. We don't know where we come from. We don't know why we are here. There's a desolation.

Is art a way to answer that question?

No, you cannot answer it. You can only bring the question to another level. I thought the bright paintings needed an explanation, and the explanation is Morgenthau, a transformation of an industrial culture to an agricultural culture that was very bad. So you have all these bright flowers, but they refer to a horrible, brutal transformation. It's kind of cynical. It's also rather painterly.

The painting titled “Morgenthau Plan” looks bucolic because of the flowers, but it is also a scene of violence, as if the wind has ripped through it.

I'm in all of them — my war, my life is in them. They're psychograms.

A reading of what's in your mind, you mean?

Of the war in my head. To paint is to have a war in the head. Each moment you have to decide to paint this way or another, and you have to destroy what you did before, because you've made another decision.

Were you thinking at all of Monet when you made all these flower paintings?

I like Monet. I like very much the haystacks. In the morning, at 11, at 4.... You see them all, but what's interesting is the transformation between them.

You mean the psychic space between the hours?

Caspar David Friedrich did it first. But he did the seasons, or the evening, or the morning. Monet did each hour, and that is a wonderful symbol for the transition of time. You don't just meditate on one. You meditate on the transition. For me, the paintings are all documents of what happened after something. After catastrophe. After war.

One of the flower paintings is almost modest in size.

It's the most dangerous, because it can go over the sofa.

What's over the sofa in your house?

I have photos from my children. I have five children, three from one wife, who are already 30, 40. The other two are 11 and 12. Once I did a sofa and a painting of a sofa. So that was a sofa painting.

In the past, your paintings had sand, lead, sunflower seeds, all kinds of things embedded in them. One of these has an electrolyzed airplane wing protruding from it. But you're right, it really is a conventional painting show.

Sometimes it's good to reduce the medium.

I wonder why anyone thought that the Morgenthau Plan was going to be effective.

Roosevelt never wanted it, but I can understand Morgenthau. He was Jewish. But they calculated that it would have killed 15 million Germans if they took away everything and left them nothing to exchange.

You once thought you would be a writer. Have you still any ambition to write?

I have a journal. I've had it since 1964 or '65. Thirty-three books now, each with 350 pages. I write a lot. They're my thoughts. They're not about what I ate. They're what I think. They're very dry.

What do you do for fun?

For fun? Is all of this not fun?

Anselm Kiefer's "Morgenthau Plan" runs May 3 through June 8 at the Gagosian Gallery, 522 West 21st Street, New York City; gagosian.com.